

Shadow Puppet

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Summary: There was never a choice. I didn't know about any of the decisions. So, when a chance finally comes, I'll have to hold on to it, won't I? ... Some things might be fate, but others are destiny. No matter what it is, I'll never become a puppet again.

1. Prologue

****Hello everyone! :) Lol, welcome to the first chapter! I'm actually in the middle of working on a different story (a Bleach fanfic, check it out if you're interested! XD), but this idea has been stewing around for a long time, and I couldn't resist posting. ^^****

****Okay, please read!****

Prologue : Abandoned

The frosty winds were downright bone-chilling, and the heavy downpour of rain wasn't making things any better. Thunder rumbled distantly in the storm, a low booming sound that seemed to reverberate deep into the ground. Thin, icy droplets were driven into my skin at high speed, and I wanted nothing more than to go back home... even if 'home' was nothing more than a small, rundown shack. At least there would be a roof over my head. Everything was dark and shadowed, the dense clouds above covering the sky in a sinister black cloak.

It was cold out here. As in, really, really cold.

"How long are we going to stand here, daddy?" My small hand tugged gently at the sleeve of Father's shirt. He gave me an annoyed glance, yanking the cloth out of my grip, and tilted the umbrella so that even more rain would fall on me.

Awesome.

"They're late," Father crossed his arms, grumbling under his breath,

"I can't afford to wait any longer here for them to hold up their end of the deal. If this rate keeps up, we're going to have to find a different way to make money."

"... Daddy?"

Father glared at me, "Keep quiet, you! We're going to stand here some more. If they don't come soon... well, there's no need for me to keep my word anymore, either."

I fell silent, sensing the irritation emanating from Father in tidal waves. Really, I was rather surprised by the fact that he hadn't up and left an hour ago, considering his temper.

After all, standing by the side of an empty road in the middle of a thunderstorm was something only fools would do.

A flash of jagged light streaked across the sky, followed by another low thunder a few moments later. The brief illumination the lightning provided lit up Father's face for no more than a mere second, but it was enough for me to see the frustration spelled out on his face as clear as day.

It was also enough for me to see him make up his decision, as a look of resolution "and was that resignation?" carved itself into his features.

"Come along," He barked to me, spinning heel and walking away, "We're going to town now."

"Oh. Okay," I blinked, regaining control over my numb limbs as I started running after him, "We aren't waiting anymore?"

"Of course not," He spat, loathing evident in the depths of his raven eyes, "I refuse to be played for like a fool. They make me come out here with you for the entire day and don't show up? This is ridiculous! I need the money, badly, but this is going too far! I will not be openly insulted like this!"

"Um..." I trotted at his side, trailing a little, "Are we going to pickpocket today, then? Or are we going to poison someone's food and play doctor? The red medicine you have works for anything! If we didn't get a job today, we can always do what we usually do and just follow a person to corner-"

"I won't get enough money just from that," Father scowled, "Besides, things are rather tight these days. People will notice if someone is suddenly murdered, not to mention we might get caught in the act without the usual merchants bustling up and about in town. There isn't enough time to mess around now... I... I do have another method, though. Just wait and see."

Father strutted down the street ahead of me, and I scampered at his heels. He would know what to do, like he always did. Father knew everything, from the basics of conning to the mastery of senbon (supposedly, great-grandpa had been a skilled acupuncturist... Father never really liked to talk about him much).

"What is this place, daddy?" I glanced around curiously, my head craned all the way back at the flashy lights that were somewhat

dimmed and subdued in the dense rain. If not for the storm right now, it probably would've been lively and brimming with energy.

Father didn't reply.

Strange. Father usually answered all my questions, even if it was in a rough and snappish manner...

Father strode up to one of the buildings that looked like some sort of restaurant. Why were we here? We usually just bought something from the stalls along the streets or scrounged for food. The only reason why we ever went someplace like this was to 'borrow' stuff from the people eating...

I sneezed, the cold beginning to seep into my skin, and quickly followed Father inside. I had nothing to complain about, these places were always warm...

"What may I do for you today, sir?"

A beautiful lady had approached Father. She wore an elaborate kimono, with sakura blossoms in full bloom and gleaming hues of emerald leaves vibrantly shining on the cloth. In fact, everything here held such a rich display of resplendent colors against the rosy wood of the walls that this seemed to be part of an entirely different world.

I stared at the restaurant in awe. None of the other shops we'd been in were as pretty as this one.

"-really? She's so young, though..." The beautiful lady was standing in front of me now, and there was a delicate scent of flowers wafting from her skin. Her violet eyes staring into mine were split into so many different shades under the bright light of the shop, "Are you sure about this, sir?"

Father nodded impatiently, his annoyance leaking through, "Just get on with it, geisha."

The lady was a geisha? One of those people who knew how to sing and dance and-

"Alright, then," She sighed, turning around and walking further into the shop, "I'll get Mother. Please make yourselves comfortable here."

I watched her retreating figure for a few seconds before I turned to Father in confusion.

"Daddy, what are we doing here?"

He folded his arms, leaning against the doorframe, "Making a deal. Though, all things considered, I'm left with the short end of the stick in the long run... 'Can't do anything about it, though, I really need some quick money on my hands right now..."

I cocked my head, not really getting what he was talking about.

Father sighed, "You'll see."

I blinked again, before I decided to go back to inspecting all the pretty decorations in the restaurant. Father knew how to handle everything. Even if his teaching methods were harsh, Father knew how to get things done. After all, I know how to survive in this world now, thanks to Father's albeit grueling trainings, and the actual experiences he heaped upon me. They weren't very pleasant, that's for sure, but he taught me what I needed to know.

That was worth it.

Father was always angry. Angry, and upset. The only time I'd seen him smile was when I showed him my first earnings -a fistful of coins I'd gotten from an unsuspecting peddler.

From that moment forward, I'd resolved to make Father happy. He's the only person I have in this cruel world, and I want to see him smile. I want to take away that shroud of anger that enveloped him. I want to stay at his side, where he wanted me, where he needed me, where I belonged.

I'd do anything for him, a thousand times over.

... Quite literally, too. No amount of scrubbing would wash away what I'd committed from my own two hands.

The geisha lady was returning now, with an older woman striding briskly in front of her. She seemed really strict and firm, and there was this keen, piercing look in her eyes that unnerved me.

"So, is this the girl?" She swiveled towards me, bending down and scrutinizing me critically, "Doesn't seem like much to me. Small, scrawny, and probably underfed. We're not running a collection center for random brats barely scraping by on the streets!"

I jerked myself away from the old woman, glaring at her defiantly. It took all of my self-restraint to bite my tongue and not retaliate with some sharp words of my own. After all, she was probably the one Father was making the deal with. I probably shouldn't upset a client.

"Spare me this talk. There's much more to her than what meets the eye," I felt a burst of jubilation and pride rush through me at Father's words, even though he didn't even bother spare a glance at me when he spoke. That's okay, though, Father was never prone to compliments. "You just want to haggle the price down, don't you? Fine. Two can play this game. There's a whole boatload of things I can dig up about your okiya, and I can assure you that you'll have no customers once word of your underhanded dealings get out."

"What are you insinuating?" The woman immediately denied, way too quick for my liking. Her eyes flickered to the side, too, a telltale sign of hiding something, "I don't know what you're talking about. This is a proper geisha house!"

"Sure it is," Father smirked, "So what's the price?"

The old woman muttered something unintelligible under her breath, obviously disgruntled, "Get over here, then. I'll give you the money."

I stared in amazement as Father strolled over nonchalantly, easily grabbing the sack of coins from the old woman. How... how did he do that? If he could just waltz in here for money, why did we... why did he make me do those jobs?

My thoughts snapped back to reality when he headed for the door, though, and I quickly moved to follow him.

"Uh-uh!" A hand grabbed the back of my ragged clothing, yanking me to an abrupt stop, "You're not going anywhere, little girl!"

"Let go of me!" I twisted, trying to get loose of the old woman's grip. For someone so old, she sure had a lot of strength in her, "I'm going with daddy!"

"Oh dear," The geisha lady covered her mouth in surprise, but the widening of her eyes couldn't hide her emotions, "She doesn't know? Sir, didn't you tell her about this?"

Father froze as he reached for the doors, effectively stopped.

The pretty geisha lady shook her head sadly, "And I was wondering why she wasn't kicking and screaming like all the others."

"What are you talking about?" I shouted, finally freeing myself from the old hag's hold, "Daddy, what's going on here? Why-"

"Enough!" Father snapped, and I immediately shut my mouth. He whirled towards me and bellowed four simple words.

Four simple words that shattered my world to pieces.

"YOU ARE STAYING HERE!"

His face was red, and his eyes were narrowed in a glare. At me.

"... Daddy...?" Something constricted painfully in my chest, "What's happening? What did-"

"Don't you get it, little girl?" The old hag snarled, grabbing my arm this time in a vice-like grip, "He just sold you to us. You belong to this okiya from this day forward."

A crushing weight slammed into my chest as her words filtered through my muddled mind.

Sold.

Father... sold me?

No. No no no no no no no. There's no way this was happening...

The image of Father bargaining for a price and snatching a bag of money replayed in front of my eyes again. How the old hag had looked over me as if I was merchandise that she was deciding whether to buy or not...

No. No way something like this would ever happen. Father wouldn't

sell me, he wouldn't-

"What she said is true," Father's voice was unusually quiet for a moment before he regained his usual attitude again, and he opened the doors.

"No!" I lunged forward, ignoring the old hag pulling at me, "Daddy! Daddy, don't leave me! I don't belong here, I-"

"You're useless," He spun around abruptly, another heated glare jabbing into my very soul, "I'm better off dumping you here, and getting some profit out of you while I'm at it. I don't need you."

Something was eating away at my heart. Something squeezed, and it was so painful, watching Father walk further and further away, disappearing down the road...

"Daddy!" My eyes stung, and something was running down my cheeks, "Daddy! Take me with you! Daddy!"

It hurt so much, watching him swagger down the street carelessly without even a backward glance. If anything, his steps seemed lighter before, and I could almost hear him humming while he was at it.

I was burning up inside. Something was tearing away at me, and it was excruciating, like I was being ripped apart, then sewn back together, then ripped apart again. There was this force just pressing at my chest and swelling, and it was so hard to breathe. I was crying now, hiccupping and sobbing simultaneously as the pain just continued to consume me and... and...

"Come on, now," A soft voice murmured next to my ear, and I barely registered the presence of the geisha next to me, "Don't cry. Crying won't make your daddy come back. I've seen men like that before... too many times to count," A sad note made itself known in her voice, "All men are like this. You'll see for yourself soon, how terrible and dark they all are."

"We can't trust them, because they are deceivers."

"We can't put our faith in them, because they only give false hope."

"We can't believe in them, because they have no loyalty."

"We can't rely on them, because they'll cast us aside without a second thought."

"We can't lose our hearts to them, no matter how handsome or charming they seem, because their hearts are black. In the end, we will be left powerless to watch as they leave, breaking all the promises and vows they've made before."

"You'll learn."

"... Everything will be fine."

*****_**Okiya**_** is basically the term for a **_**geisha**_** house. Girls also learn how to become a **_**geisha**_** at their

respective ****_**okiya**_****, and the girls are known as
****_**maiko**_**** (literally, 'dance-child').**

****Any thoughts? XD How was it? Please leave your comments and suggestions! Not everything is set in stone yet, so please review and let me know your opinions and ideas!****

2. Chapter 1

****Thank you for the reviews! :) It was really encouraging, and helped me churn out this chapter! (strictly speaking, the first chapter of the story XD).****

****!IMPORTANT NOTE!****

****The timeline of this story will actually be starting
before**** the actual Hakuouki series. ^^ It starts at Hakuouki Reimeiroku, referenced from .com/. There are some translations here directly from this lovely site, so all rights go to Tokio for that!****

****On a side note, there is a 'Serizawa (Kamo)' introduced in this chapter. He is the lead commander of the Shinsengumi, known as Roshigumi right now (they haven't earned their new name yet XD). Kondou is also a commander, but his status military-wise is lower than Serizawa. Hopefully, I'll be able to capture his character and personality well enough throughout the story. I'm not exactly very historically accurate, so please forgive me for any possible errors!****

****No, you don't have to go to the site and read everything there. I would recommend it, but in no way is it necessary for you to know everything on there (heck, I don't either ^^").****

****!IMPORTANT NOTE END!****

****Wow, this is ratherâ€¦ long. 0.0 Well, I hope you enjoy this chapter! Thanks for bearing with me!****

Ch 1 : The Banquet

It was really, really stuffy in here and extremely uncomfortable. The room was filled with multitudes of rowdy voices overlapping each other, and the clinks and clangs of sake bottles and cups could be heard every so often. My blue kimono was suffocating me, and the elaborate obi tied around my waist was just the icing on the cake.

... The fact that I was sitting right here as a serving girl just made this entire situation downright torturous. Who set me up for this, anyways? I'm pretty sure I missed the majority of the sake pouring classes. I'm supposed to play music with the others in over there in the corner, not sit here and attempt to be one of the flirtatious hostesses!

I hated this. I hated plastering a smile to my face every day and dressing like a doll. I hated being a maiko, an 'apprentice geisha'. Some of the other maiko had been sold as well, but they were all happy and excited about this. They were looking forward to

the 'glamorous' life of a _geisha_, and of being taught by 'professionals', and were completely ignorant of all the other darker things that came with the package.

Yukiko, one of the older _geisha_ and _my _onee-san_, the one who'd guided me after... after Father left, had shown me what the true life of a _geisha_ was. Never being able to act how you wanted to, always having to please the men who came here...

Even with all the years that had passed since the day I'd been sold by my father, I never forgot the raw pain and hurt. Maybe that's why my smiles always felt forced, and my laughs were always a little hollow.

I sneaked a glance at Shizuka, who was serving a rather rowdy trio across the room. Shizuka was a friend of mine, and a fellow _maiko_. The _geisha_ mentoring her, her _onee-san_, was on fairly good terms with Yukiko, so we were sometimes grouped together in our lessons. She was much more exuberant and outgoing than me, not to mention she completely outclassed all of us in dancing. Shizuka seemed to have a natural gift for it, and she was already making a name for herself in the _Shimabara_ district. Even most of the _geisha_ were eclipsed by her.

She seemed to be having a grand time right now, smiling and giggling as she flirted shamelessly with the men. Her hazel eyes lit up mischievously when they met mine as I glanced at her, and a foreboding chill suddenly ran down my spine.

When she coyly twined her hands through the man's low ponytail and leaned into his ear to whisper something to him, I knew nothing good could come out of it.

Especially when he laughed and nodded.

Shizuka then stood up from her seat, attracting the attention of everyone in the room. Already, the urge to face-palm was overwhelming.

All of the _geisha_ were visibly surprised by her actions, if their varying degrees of shock were anything to go by. Sure, Shizuka was becoming well-known and had an excellent reputation building up, but... she was still a _maiko_. Doing something like this at a banquet was outright-

"What a daring girl," I heard one of them whisper to my right, "I wonder what Mother would do if she heard about this?"

I ignored them, my eyes fixed on Shizuka.

Sit down, Shizuka. My gaze skittered across the room, trying to analyze the majority of the men's reactions to her surprisingly bold move. A few of them seemed annoyed, but most of them were bordering on curiosity and amusement.

That was a relief.

All of them were _samurai_. Well, somewhat more like rogue swordsmen than actual _samurai_. However, that didn't change the fact that each of them knew how to wield a sword and knew how to kill.

The different swords at their sides right now served as a testament to that.

"Good evening, everyone." Shizuka gave a polite bow and put on her prettiest smile, "Eating without any entertainment is so dull, is it not? If you would permit me, dancing for everyone here would be my honor."

Ah, that's what she wanted. Of course it would be beneficial to her future geisha career if she were to perform for such a large group at such a large banquet. Also, our okiya would begin earning even more money if she were to pull off a successful hit tonight.

Maybe this is what they call killing two birds with one stone.

"Of course, that would be fantastic!" One of the men seemed quite happy and enthusiastic. He had brown hair that was neatly tied up in the back, and his strong build immediately set him apart as one of the stronger samurai present. "It's very kind of you to offer--"

"Tch, such an insolent girl," The man sitting right next to me cut in, his gruff voice abruptly startling me and almost causing me to jump, "How dare you be so presumptuous as to interrupt my banquet? What gives you the right to stand up like this?"

Shizuka was visibly startled, not having expected a reaction like that... She'd never been rejected by the men before, so I guess this was a whole new revelation for her. Especially with the attention of everyone in the room trained on her.

"I..." She stuttered, faltering and at a loss for what to do.

The brown-haired man from earlier looked over uneasily at the gruff man, "Um, Serizawa-san, is it really necessary--"

"For someone like you, perhaps," Serizawa-han glared at him, "A samurai needs to be shown proper respect, Kondou-kun."

"But surely there is no need to--" The man broke off as he was fixed with a piercing glare from the older one, "..."

...He looked like he still wanted to protest, still wanted to speak out... but there was something else... something else that was holding his tongue and staying his lips...

The palpable silence that fell over the room now was akin to a thick, weighted blanket. Shizuka lowered her head, and I could make out a small shaking in her body now.

This wasn't good.

I scanned the room to see what the geisha were doing. All of them seemed rather pale, and made no move to diffuse this tenacious atmosphere. None of them were moving to help one of their own, even though a man from this group had tried to help her.

If nothing was done to resolve the situation, quickly...

"My sister was only trying to make this banquet more enjoyable, sir." Out of all the surprised looks I'd gotten, I'm absolutely positive that no one was more shocked than myself. What in the world caused me to speak up and defend her like this? Now everyone's attention was directed towards me instead.

Lovely.

The tall, muscular man towering over me with practically fire showering the background didn't help matters, either.

I swallowed tentatively and continued, "Sh-Shizuka was only offering to share her talent and joy with everyone. Surely there is nothing wrong with this? She meant no disrespect, and she is one of the youngest of us, therefore very easily excited. The merriment of this banquet must have spurred on her rashness. If her actions have shown disrespect to you, sir, then we deeply apologize."

I bowed slightly, my heart thudding against my chest, and hoping that my words were working. Please, please, please...

"So you're saying that she should be forgiven just because she's young?" His face was really scary, and he appeared to be pretty ticked off about this. Was his authority the highest out of all the samurai in this room?

... Knowing my luck, he probably was. This banquet just got better and better, didn't it? "Age is no excuse, girl. And you seem to be as young as she is."

"T-that-that's irrelevant," I stammered, before I somehow salvaged my wits again, "I'm not saying that she should be forgiven because she's young, I'm saying that she made this mistake because she's young. Our other sisters are all older and more experienced, so they know when to speak out and when to remain quiet among guests. Shizuka doesn't know how to judge situations yet, so I beg for you to be more lenient on her. If you would grace us with your forgiveness, sir, we would be eternally grateful and do our best to compensate you tonight."

"And what would you be suggesting by compensation?" He raised an eyebrow, as if he was challenging me.

... Bring it.

"Shizuka is a very talented dancer," I chose my words carefully, trying to play my cards right. After all, if he hinted at compensation already, chances were that he wasn't holding this matter as seriously as before...

Hopefully.

"In fact, she's the best dancer in all of Shimabara." I continued, "Would it not be fitting for her to compensate her accidental disrespect with her original offer that began this misunderstanding in the first place?"

Silence fell across the room. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Inwardly, I was gritting my teeth and sweating from the strenuous tension tightly strained across the room. I'd run into stubborn customers before, but... the expression on his face, the tone to his words... something like this was unheard of. If he refused to let the matter drop, then the entire okiya would be in danger. These men were all samurai, for crying out loud! One word, one order, and we were all screwed-

"BWAHAHAHA!" I really did jump this time, my heart thumping violently when the man suddenly burst out laughing, "You've got a way with words, girl. That's some nerve you have there... Alright, then, let's see what that little dancer of yours has got."

-The air immediately became easier to breathe in, and I slowly exhaled a long breath, one I hadn't even noticed I'd been holding in. Everyone gradually began talking again after his decision, and the heavy, oppressive atmosphere from earlier was gone. The laughter and cheer of a banquet were slowly recovering, and the stirrings of merriment were showing its first stages again.

I could almost cry in relief. I never want to do anything like that again. Ever.

Yukiko caught my eye across the room this time, her violet eyes filled with relief, and a knot in me seemed to loosen. Thank goodness this was over...

"Hm. Not many people dare to talk back to Serizawa-san like that."

My body jerked for a moment, the smooth voice addressing me, and the sake bottle I held in my hands almost dropped onto the ground.

I usually stayed pretty silent and tried to make myself unnoticeable when serving the men. After all, I'd heard too many horror stories about geisha who'd attracted too much attention from onee-san. This was the first time that someone addressed me within a meal that contained something other than "more sake".

I turned my head in the direction of the voice, only to see a rather young man sipping wine from his cup. His reddish-brown hair was tied up similarly to the nicer man who'd spoken earlier, and his eyes were a brilliant emerald green. His outfit consisted of a dark red haori that was partially open, and brown hakama.

"Um, well, not really," I waited until he'd downed his sake before moving over and pouring him some more. A good hostess refills the cups, right? "I... I only did what I had to do in that situation. Besides, the man over there -Kondou-han, yes?- spoke out before me."

A small smile played around the edge of his lips, "Yeah. Kondou-san is like that... always trying to help others..."

"... He seems different," I don't know what made me speak out. I normally didn't talk at all. So why...? "He...he seems... kind." I frowned.

I trusted my instincts. They were what kept me safe from all the men

that frequented the _okiya..._ So... why were my instincts telling me that this one... this one was actually okay?

It was completely contradictory to what _onee-san_ had taught me.

Even more contradictory was the fact that I was sitting here, voicing my thoughts and feelings to another. One of the first things I'd learned from _onee-san_ was that it was dangerous to tell how you felt about something to the men.

After all, invoking personal opinions were one of the many ways to create attachments...

I abruptly cut off my train of thought and refilled the _sake_ cup again.

"I'm thankful to him." I stated simply, "If he didn't say anything first, I don't think I would've been able to find it in myself to speak out for Shizuka."

"That's Kondou-san for you," There was a certain fondness in his tone as he spoke about him, "Inspiring and charismatic."

A type of companionable silence fell between the two of us, and for once I wasn't paranoid and wary of the man sitting next to me. I sneaked another glance at him, curiosity having been piqued. He certainly wasn't one of those types of men who could make others relax just by being around them. That would be Kondou-han. In fact, he was almost the exact opposite. Even though he sat in a slightly slouched position, there was a certain... well, there was a certain degree of an aura that seemed to ward off others. So far, he hadn't snapped at me or shooed me off like the many other men similar to his attitude, so I decided to just settle down and try to enjoy myself.

It wasn't often that I could loosen up amongst all the men. Or my sisters, for that matter. Ugh.

He didn't seem inclined to be joining the rowdy behavior of the ones sitting around him, though... rather, he seemed to be more interested in watching what everyone in the room was doing. His gaze seemed to be constantly focusing on one particular direction, though...

I peered over discreetly as well. What caught his attention?

... There was a young man around his age sitting there quietly as he ate his food. His long dark hair was tied in a low ponytail, and... huh. He held his chopsticks with his left hand. Neat.

"Isn't it strange to stare at a man in a red-light district?" A familiar rough voice suddenly cut across us, and it took formidable self-control not to jump again.

The man sitting next to me didn't seem to be bothered, though, still sipping his _sake_.

"Don't I have the freedom to pick what I look at? Besides, I'm not interested in this type of place to begin with." He replied easily.

"Is that so?" Serizawa-han arched a bushy eyebrow, "Then why did you come with us today, Okita?"

"Simple," Okita-han shrugged, "If I tag along, I might find a chance to kill you."

Something in me was supposed to run cold at those seemingly casual words. In the middle of a banquet, someone was openly talking about murder. I was supposed to be terrified and start shrieking or something, like what most _geisha_ would do.

... I poured more _sake_.

The clear liquid ran scarlet for a split second in front of my eyes. I hope my hand didn't tremble like I imagined...

Serizawa-han was laughing again, "Kill me? A child like you? That's an interesting joke."

"I could kill you any time, if I'm given permission to."

The older man snorted, "A kitten hissing with its hair standing up is still a kitten. Your words pose no threat to me." His head swiftly tilted back as he gulped down more _sake_, "But if it's Hijikata saying this... that's a different story."

Okita-han winced, and Serizawa-han continued on, "When he stared at me at _Honjou-shuku_, it sent chills up my spine. The murderous intent in his eyes were genuine. Compared to that, your killing threats are like jokes."

He jabbed a hand at the man Okita-han had been looking at earlier, "I bet Saitou has killed before. I can tell that when seeing him."

The image of pale, pale skin flashed before me, and a body convulsing on the ground, trickling red...

"... Killing..." I perfectly remembered the cold, clammy hands that had clamped tightly onto me, even after the man was long dead. I remembered staring at the gleaming crimson needles that were embedded through the throat, feeling nothing but a sort of detached emptiness before guilt and remorse sparked in the depths of my mind...

... which were swiftly removed when my father spoke but two words, "Good job."

Killing that man had made my father happy and proud of me. That was the mantra that had engraved itself into my subconsciousness from experience... which quickly led to a second time, a third, a fourth, a fifth...

...

... Then, he sold me._ After all those things I'd done for him..._

It took quite a while for me to notice that the two weren't talking anymore. I looked up from where I'd been fiddling with the _sake_ bottle, only to see both of their gazes trained on me.

"Eh?" I blinked in confusion, "D-did I do something wrong? Um, I-I mean, please excuse me if I_--"

A shrill, piercing scream rang throughout the room at that exact moment, and my head snapped around toward the source. I could literally feel my eyes widen, and something in my heart went 'clunk' when my mind finally processed what it was seeing.

There was a dagger. A small throwing dagger, one meant for sudden, unsuspecting sneak attacks. A dagger with a sharp cutting edge, which would allow it to sink its blade into anything that was in its path.

A dagger that had lodged itself through _onee-san_, a brilliant scarlet seeping out as the dark color bloomed from its embedded hilt.

Ch 1 : End

*****_**Maiko**_** are basically **_**geisha**_** in-training. From my research, they address the **_**geisha**_** mentoring them as '***_**onee-san'***_**, which is a respectful way of saying 'older sister.'**

***In a geisha house (**_**okiya**_**), all the **_**geisha**_** and **_**maiko**_** address the woman in charge as 'Mother.'**

I'm saying this right now: I am not an expert in Japanese. It's just that the context of the story doesn't seem to flow very well without the suffixes added to the names, soâ€¦ yups. If everything jumbles together and gets too confusing later on, though, I might take it out.

! If anyone is wondering what Serizawa means by referring to **_Honjou-shuku**_**, follow the link here: . It's the last bit near the bottom. No, you don't have to read this if you don't want to. I'm pretty sure that this will be added into the story later onâ€¦ it's just for those of you who are really curious.**

**Feedback would be appreciated! â€¦ I'm not sure how I did for this chapterâ€¦ ^^" **

All the same, I hope you enjoyed it! :)

3. Chapter 2

Hey there everyone! ^^" Sorry about going MIA for awhile, finals was killing meâ€¦ _--

Aaanyways, finally got up to writing again! :D I hit a bit of a writing block with my other story, soâ€¦ well, hey, at least I finished the chapter for this one, right? Riiiiiight? ^^"*

It's not as long as the previous ones, but I still hope you'll enjoy it! :] Thanks to everyone who reviewed!

Ch 2 : Attacked

For a moment, Yukiko's expression only showed astonishment, shock, pain...

... The front of her yellow kimono was completely stained red, spreading and spreading and _spreading_. It was all red, red, red, so much red...

Onee-san crumpled onto the ground, and all the men were standing up and unsheathing their swords and...

Calm down. Think!

Onee-san was bleeding so much and... and...

Dagger. Assassination. Someone must be after the samurai here, no one would bother going this far for a simple okiya... Look, the window is open. There's the first of them... dressed in black, head to toe. Good for camouflage in the night. Easier to move around unnoticed in the dark. They must've been waiting for quite a while, then, considering the layout of the okiya. Ninja? Rogue samurai? Hard to tell...

The crash of plates and cups shattering as they were shoved onto the ground jerked me out of my reverie, making me jump back instinctively in an effort to get away from the sudden noise.

All the men were starting to fight now, as most of them had already drawn their swords. A few unfortunate ones who had been sitting near the window from which the attackers entered were already dead, but the majority of the _samurai_ were moving into basic stances as they began to engage the enemy.

Nine years without bloodshed could certainly dull a person.

Right now, rationality was telling me to run. It was shrieking at me to escape from this imminent danger with the other _geisha_ and _maiko_, who were already running away, the pattering of feet thudding onto the ground again and again...

I scrambled to my feet and forced them to move, as fast as I could in this _kimono_. There was a sudden burst of pain across my exposed shoulder, and the feeling of blood trickling from the sword wound was too familiar for my liking. That didn't deter me from my goal, though, I was almost there...

So close...

I collapsed next to Yukiko, something in my chest pounding hard, and I reached out a shaky hand to her.

"_Onee-san?_" My fingertips stopped when they were barely brushing her, for fear of incurring further harm.

Her skin was pale, even with all the heavy makeup on. The normally smooth creamy shade had been replaced by a sickly gray tinge, and she was so, so _still..._

How do you deal with weapon wounds again? You... you pull it out, then staunch the bleeding, and bandage...

"_Onee-san_, I'm going to pull out the dagger," I don't think she heard me. She was probably going into shock now from the pain, which would make her very detached from her surroundings. I could hardly even hear myself over the battle cries and clamor of steel biting steel, and I knew I had to hurry before one of the _katana_ sliced us to pieces in the chaos.

... Could I still save her, though? I had no way of knowing if the dagger had pierced her heart or not...

Just the mere thought of the possibility of it chilled me to the bone, but I forced those doubts away. I had no time to be pondering over that. Yukiko had helped me through my worst times, and it was time for me to do the same.

"It's going to hurt, but don't panic, alright?" My hand crept toward the hilt that seemed to be embedded in her flesh as well. "Everything is going to be fine."

Those words had never tasted so bitter in my mouth before.

"Pl...plea...se..."

Something in me broke at that, and I stubbornly repeated myself.

"Everything is going to be fine."

I closed my fingers around the dagger and _pulled_.

Immediately, a warm liquid splashed onto my arm, staining my sleeves and just splattering everywhere. _Onee-san_ had screamed again, but no one paid her any attention this time. There were too many screams and other sounds mixing together throughout the room that no one noticed the plight of a simple _geisha_.

Staunch the bleeding.

I ripped off the sleeve of my kimono, the tear of fabric unusually loud in my ears, and forced myself to crouch over her and press the cloth against the wound. Blood seemed to well up endlessly, and I found myself ripping off more and more cloth in a vain attempt to stop the bleeding...

The tingle on my neck was screaming at me to duck, and I did so... just in time to avoid being decapitated. The clangs of swords and the movements of the men fighting were making my heart beat erratically, but I couldn't afford to let fear overtake me. Not now, when _onee-san_ needed me.

A crimson liquid trickled down my left arm in a steady stream from where I'd been cut earlier, but I didn't make any move to take care of it. I could afford to lose a little blood, if it meant keeping _onee-san_ alive. _Onee-san_ had to live. She had to, she had to, she had to!

Our blood mingled together as my efforts to staunch her bleeding become more desperate. It just wasn't stopping no matter what I did,

just flowing and flowing...

I need a doctor. I can't do this on my own, the wound is too...

...?

It... it stopped. Well, not _stopped_ stopped per say, but it was obviously beginning to... dare I say lessen?

I tore off yet another strip of fabric, idly wondering what our _okiya_ Mother would say about the state of my _kimono_ now, and began wrapping the wound as best as I could. As far as I could tell, the wound wasn't necessarily big, but it was deep. Really deep.

I glanced around, noticing the sounds of battle trickling to a stop as well. There were only a few black-dressed people left, and they were being quickly dispatched of. There weren't many of the attackers sticking around anymore, but many of the _samurai_ had left the room already, presumably to hunt down the escapees.

... Did I really take that long? Or were the _samurai_ just... exceptionally strong?

"Is she alright?"

There was a sudden bout of panic in my chest at the voice addressing me, before my mind processed the words and I forcibly loosened my grip on the dagger that I was somehow holding in my hand. The person speaking was that man who'd helped Shizuka from earlier, Kondou-han.

"I... I don't know." That was the truth. I wanted to believe that she'd be perfectly fine, I _wanted_ her to open her eyes again and smile and... and...

Death is many things. It's alluring. It provides a way out from the pains in the world. It's the only thing constant with every person in the world.

... But death is most certainly _not_ fair.

"I... I'm sorry for her current state."

"Don't be," I shook my head listlessly, "It's not your fault. You weren't the one who threw the dagger..."

"But... I was the one the dagger was supposed to hit."

"What?" I whirled around.

"She... she moved," He said, lowering his head, "At the last moment, she moved. None of us knew, and... one second she stepped in front of me to say something and the next... the dagger struck her."

It was him. The dagger had been meant for him!

His eyes were focused on mine. They contained sorrow, sadness, and... was that remorse? Was he _apologetic_? He... he really would've been willing to have been the one reduced to this?

Doubtful. Highly doubtful.

My hand clenched around the dagger still in my grip and I threw the projectile without a second thought.

Kondou-han's eyes widened, and I couldn't blame him. Who would expect a geisha to go around throwing pointy objects, anyways? But... although shock and surprise were evident in his eyes, there was also... understanding? _Sympathy?_

Eh, I've never been too good at reading others. Yukiko was the one who could read all the men like an open book.

Besides, it didn't matter what he thought of me.

The dagger slipped past him with a hairsbreadth, and sunk into the forehead of the black-clad assassin creeping up behind him. There was a crunch of bone shattering and a sickening squelch of flesh and blood before the man toppled over, dead. Red, red blood was streaming all over his face like a waterfall, gathering and pooling under his head now.

... Guess I haven't lost my accuracy all these years, after all.

Should I be happy? Should I be sad? Should I be worried? ... What _should_ I be feeling right now? Everything was still such a hazy buzz...

After all these years of gaudy pretenses, of hiding that sense of _betrayal_ and _hurt_ at being _abandoned_... The blood that stained my hands in the past was finally catching up to me...

Something in me knew. Something in me had known this was inevitable, ever since I literally watched the light fading away in the eyes of the first man I'd killed. I'd put it off at that time, though, my childish self latching onto Father with nothing but pure, simple devotion...

Life was different in the _okiya_. You didn't have to steal or kill in order to survive. You just needed to know how to act pretty. You needed to know how to entertain men. Picking up subtle signs, noticing small facts, then deciding on the best course of actions...

There was nothing glamorous about the life of a _geisha_. You had to tread carefully, gauging the varying reactions of all the different customers.

This had kept me busy. It had kept me distracted. It had kept me from what I'd been trained to do from the moment of my birth, deviating from the path my father set down for me, what he molded me into...

...

The smooth wood in the hallway was chillingly cold under my touch. Did I run? Maybe. Maybe I did. _Onee-san_ would probably be taken care of by those _samurai_, with their supposed 'honor' and all... or

at least, Kondou-han would make sure she was okay, right?

No, I'm not making up excuses to not return to that room. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not...

I don't care what anyone else thinks of me. I don't care about what people think of a _killer_ lurking under the guise of a doll. It doesn't matter, doesn't matter, doesn't matter...

Father had accepted me as a killer, but only to earn money for him. Who would expect a little kid to be capable of stealing and killing so efficiently? Even if we were in times of war, children were supposed to be _innocent_...

I leaned my forehead against the freezing wood, desperately trying to calm my mind and end this morbid torrent of thoughts. It was so cold, so numbing...

Was I numbed to death now? First that conversation, then the dagger... What caused me to do that, really? I didn't even _know_ Kondou-han... I didn't _feel_ anything for him... it was just gratitude, for helping Shizuka. So why did I do that, then? Why add another death onto my conscience?

I could feel a slight tremble in my body now. All these years, trying to lose myself in the fake laughter and false happiness of the _okiya_ with the other _maiko_ and _geisha_...it had always been there. That desire to hold a dagger again, that longing to feel a _senbon_ in my fingers...

The urge that I'd worked so hard to suppress, so hard to hide all this time...

... That craving for blood...

I closed my eyes, trying to calm the turbulent emotions that had been triggered by this entire fiasco, and a bitter smile crept over my lips.

... Once a killer, always a killer.

Ch 2 : End

â€¦| **Comments? XD Originally, I planned to stop the chapter where our **_**maiko **_**throws the dagger in Kondou's direction, butâ€¦| yeah, I'm not an evil author yet. ^^ **

Please show your support by reviewing! I already have a couple of ideas I can't wait to put into the story~

4. Chapter 3

Hope everyone had a wonderful break! ^^ Oh, and Happy New Year!

**Anyways, here's the next chapter! XD Finally updating nowâ€¦| ^^"
Btw, I'm working on a new Gundam 00 fic, too, so please remember to drop by! :D Thank you very much to everyone that reviewed!**

Chapter 3 : Rain

The sky was cloudy and gray, perfectly attuned to the somber mood in the air. No one around me was talking, all the other _maiko_ finally ceasing their incessant chatter for once. They were all glassy-eyed and shivering, and had their gazes fixated on the ground in front of them as their heads were bowed. Sadness and sorrow poured off them in spades, and one particularly young girl looked like she was about to crumble into tears on the spot.

I crouched down, gently clearing out a little space with one hand, and set down the white chrysanthemum I'd been holding on the smooth, cold stone. The snowy petals bursting forward in silvery bloom joined its brethren forlornly, and I stood up again.

"Hey, Tsukiyo."

Tsukiyo was my closest friend here, the other _maiko_ that had been apprenticed to Yukiko with me. She hadn't been there at the banquet, but... when the _okiya_ fell under attack... one of the assassins had found her and proceeded to... to...

The state I'd found her in was terrible. Her _kimono_ was all in tatters and there were all sorts of scratches and... and _marks_ over her entire body...

My mind had almost shut down at the sight of her, but... somehow.. somehow I'd managed to clean her up as best I could.

You know how to fight! Why didn't you help me? Why weren't you there for me, why weren't you there for me like I was for you?

I promptly dispelled the remnants of my latest nightmare and forced myself to focus on the grave in front of me. The guilt... not only the deaths I'd caused, but also the deaths I could've prevented would haunt me forever.

"Tsukiyo..." I touched the edge of the tablet with my fingers, "It... it was so _chaotic_ that night, and when I saw _onee-san_ get hurt, I just... She's going to be fine now. The... the dagger hadn't hit any vital points, and... she's recovering."

I took in a deep breath, "I... I'm sorry. At that moment, I completely forgot everything else, and... I... I didn't know..."

Something hot and stinging pierced my eyes, but I tried to shrug it off.

"I wish I'd been with you," I started tracing her name, which was deeply engraved into the stone, "I... I could've done something, couldn't I? You were always the pretty and dainty one out of the two of us... I-I was always sent to the kitchens for misbehaving by Mother. I could've handled... th-that torture," I almost choked on my words, "I would've found a way to... to escape. You were always the obedient one..."

I almost laughed now, "I-I'm not making any sense now, am I? I... I don't even know what I'm saying anymore... But... Tsukiyo, I really regret not going to find you. I should've searched for you, made sure

you were safe like the other _maiko_ here right now. I... I can't turn back time, though. I wish I could. I can't do anything now but blame myself for everything... I'm so sorry."

I could only imagine the terror and pain she'd been put through that night as the battle transpired. Being tortured and violated and... and...

"I'm so sorry," I repeated numbly again.

Was it raining? There were a few darker imprints on the gray stone right now.

Somehow, I couldn't find it in myself to hurry up and find shelter somewhere before the storm caught me.

"You're my best friend, Tsukiyo." I sat down now, talking to her grave as I pointedly ignored the rising winds and small pitter-patters of droplets, "All these years together... do you remember that time when we were taking tea ceremony classes? I kept pouring the tea in weird jerks and it was always spilling out. Mother was _so_ _furious_ with me and she was about to give me another lashing... and then you came in and distracted her. I escaped out the window," A small smile tugged at my mouth, "That look on her face was _priceless._"

"There was also that other time when I convinced you to ditch dancing lessons with me. We wandered through the streets and ate _dango_ and made up stories about the people passing by. We also ran into that nice man who taught us how to play the flute, remember? I think we also played near the river... and _you_ were actually the one who suggested we catch frogs! We ended up staying out really late, and we even watched the stars together."

"Everything was so nice back then..."

I gave a small sigh, my chest somehow feeling lighter at those memories, "What am I going to do now? Our _okiya_ closed down, and now I belong to the one a few streets over. It's going to be so dull without you... I'm going to miss you, Tsukiyo."

It was true: even now I felt so cold, cold, cold, and _empty._

"You were the best thing that ever happened to me," I whispered, "I'll never forget you."

It was really raining now. Raining _hard._ The winds picked up, unusually strong, driving the water into my skin like millions of sharp needles.

... This was really too nostalgic for my liking, too similar to the last day I'd spent with Father...

"Are you alright?"

My head snapped around at the sudden voice. I hadn't even _noticed_ the person standing behind me for who-knows-how-long...!

She was probably another _geisha_. I blinked, not recognizing her. That was strange. I knew everyone from our _okiya_, and no one else

would approach a _maiko_ for no reason...

"Sitting in a storm like this is bad for your health. You'll get sick."

She had dark eyes -eyes that made me lurch, they were so similar to Yukiko's- and light brown hair that was tied up with a wide array of hair ornaments and clips. Her pink, flower-patterned _kimono_ was getting a little damp from the rain, but she didn't seem to mind it at all. Then again, that could be because she had an umbrella. An umbrella that she was also using to partially shield me from the rain...

"... Um, thank you for the concern," I scrambled up stiffly, my legs having fallen asleep on me, "I'll be fine, though. I'm never sick."

It was true. For some weird reason, I always stayed perfectly normal and healthy even when others were all down with the cold.

"Ah, I see. So it's true, then," She remarked offhandedly.

"Excuse me?" Something in me ran cold, and it wasn't the rain pouring down right now.

She gave me a small smile, but it wasn't exactly a warm, friendly one. It had more of an icy, condensing feel to it...

"I'm sorry, are you not aware of it?" She shook her head sadly, "It must've been really hard for you, all these years living like this."

A tense wariness arose in me, and the freezing cold completely disappeared. This girl... _what did she know about me? What the heck was she going on about? _If I asked her directly about that, though, I'd just be playing into her hand. She was obviously baiting me, dangling information in front of me and trying to get me to go for the hook...

"Who are you?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Me?" She seemed partly surprised, partly amused by my response, "... My name is Nagumo Kaoru... but that isn't really what you want to know, is it?"

"No, it's not," I folded my arms, "What do you want from me? I... I'm just a _maiko_." Downplay things. I needed to downplay things.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that if I were you," Her eyes glinted, "You are _much_ more than a simple _maiko_. Haven't you noticed any... differences?"

Another chill ran down my spine, "What do you mean?"

She smirked slightly, "... I see. You really _are_ unaware of everything, aren't you?"

There was nothing demeaning in her tone. Just faint traces of amusement hidden under courteous manners.

She knew something. About what, I wasn't too sure... the things I'd done? My past? Her words had opened up a plethora of questions, yet I still got the feeling that I was only a pawn to her. Sure, all her queries seemed to be focused and based on me, but... well, it was just a hunch, but I suspected that she was planning something that involved me. How she knew me or even found me, I wasn't sure of. Maybe one of my clients from so long ago had leaked information? Anyways, I wasn't about to let myself be used again. Not now, not ever.

... But... this girl... Nagumo Kaoru... she seemed to know something about me. My instincts were screaming that this was important, and my gut was telling me that I needed to find out what she knew. Maybe it was just curiosity?

... If I let this chance slip by...

"All you've done is give me a bunch of questions, miss." I injected some force into my voice, finally deciding on a course of action. I'd go along with her for now. This... well, I couldn't exactly ignore it, could I? "We've both got things to do, so please spare me the circles we're going in right now. If you want something from me, then just say it."

"What makes you think I want something from you? Besides, I'm not the one who gave you the questions," She adjusted the umbrella so that it was more or less shared evenly between the two of us, leaning in toward me as if we were sharing a secret, "You can thank Yukimura Kenji for that."

"Yukimura Kenji?"

Kaoru's face was only mere inches from mine, her hazel eyes locked onto mine, "He was the one who started this entire thing. Everything... everything began that night... that night when everything changed and he discovered that accursed blood."

I swallowed thickly, an ominous foreboding seeping into my body, "... Who is he, exactly? And-and what blood?"

She drew back languidly, a satisfied look on her face, "Don't be so hasty."

"What do you mean by all this?" I exploded, "You... you give me such vague answers and... you-!" I sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm myself down.

It sounded like there was some other great plot to all this. I didn't really care much about that, though... I was more worked up over the fact that she knew about my past. What if... what if she knew my mother?

As far as I can recall, all my memories were filled with the times when I was with Father. Everything else before it was a complete blank. Did I have a mother? Did I use to have a proper family? What happened? What caused Father to take me to live on the streets, killing and stealing to survive?

I needed to know what was going on.

There was an intent look in her eyes as she regarded me coolly. I had this hunch that there was something else to her, something I couldn't quite put my finger on... Although, Nagumo Kaoru was pretty suspicious. How did she find out about all this, anyways? And why was she approaching me with it?

... No one would do something without a reason. No one would offer something without wanting something in exchange...

"What do you want from me?" I finally asked.

She smiled, "You catch on quite quickly, don't you? Don't worry, I won't ask you to kill anyone. On the contrary, I want you to-"

Both of our heads snapped around at the same time when we heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps. There weren't a lot of people, but they were pretty close...

"I'll find you later, alright?" Kaoru patted my shoulder, and I almost flinched at the contact, "Don't fret, I won't make you do anything terrible... although, I won't be able to say the same for some others who want to use you. Try not to go poking around for information on your own. It could end up quite... dangerous, and unpleasant if you were to run into them."

"Wait a second, what-"

"Just do as I say," I swear, there was no blood circulating through my shoulder right now, she was gripping my shoulder so hard that I could feel her nails digging into me painfully, "I'll give you your answers. Be patient and obedient, and everything will become clear... You'll return to them soon enough."

"Hang on!" I spun back around, "What do you-... mean..."

There was no one standing there. She'd just... disappeared. Vanished.

I shivered. Nagumo Kaoru wasn't a ghost, was she? I mean, ghosts don't run around trying to make people do things... do they?

The footsteps were getting really close now. I should probably head back to the new okiya now, even though I'd get scolded and beaten for staying out late. Yeesh. I hadn't meant it literally when I told the other geisha and maiko that I wanted to be left alone saying my goodbyes...

"Ah, it's you!"

I turned back again, who in the world would-?

... oh.

Of course. The world just loved to mock me, didn't it?

I hurriedly plastered a smile onto my face and bowed politely, "Good evening, Kondou-han, Okita-han."

I felt so awkward as I watched the two of them walk over... How would Kondou-han feel about a girl who almost killed him, missing him

just by that _tiny_ little bit?

"What are you doing out here in this weather without an umbrella? You'll catch a cold," Kondou-han said kindly as he held his bamboo umbrella out to me.

"Oh, um, it-it's alright!" My mind immediately plunged into chaos at this gesture as I shook my head wildly, "I-I can't possibly take it! I, uh, I'm h-heading back right now, so I don't need it-"

"Why are you here, anyways?" Okita-han looked directly at me, and I suppressed a shudder as it felt like his eyes could pierce through my soul, "It's rather suspicious of a _maiko_ to be here all by herself..."

My heart leaped into my throat. Had they seen Nagumo Kaoru?

"It's alright, Souji," Kondou-han smiled merrily as he clapped him on the back heartily. I tried not to wince, "She wouldn't harm us!"

I tried to disguise the strangled noise in my throat as a cough, although I don't think it fooled them. For heaven's sake, I almost _killed _him_ that night and he-!

"What's that for?" He patted me on the head, "Truth be told, I wanted to find some time to thank you personally after that was over. I'm very grateful that you saved my life that night."

... And so, the world came to a screeching halt.

Ch 3 : End

****Don't forget to head over to my new fanfic if you're interested! XD (self-promotion much again?）****

****(Cough)(Cough) Soooooooo, the plot finally begins! :] Lol, I know that Kaoru is a guyâ€| but our **_**maiko**_ doesn'tâ€| yet. ^^ Somehow, I'm not too satisfied with this chapter, thoughâ€| but I couldn't find a good fix,soâ€| yeah. . Help, anyone?**) ****

5. Chapter 4

****I won't lie, I got seriously sidetracked by other things going on in my life and I lost interest in writing my fics. So first off, thank you very much to everyone who reviewed despite myâ€| well, having dropped off the face of the planet for such a long timeâ€| o.o" I know I probably lost a lot of my readers with that, but I read some of the encouragements I got recently when I was clearing out my word docs â€| soâ€| XD Here's the next chappie!**) ****

****For those of you wondering if I'm going to be updating consistently again, I'm really, really sorry that I won't be living up to those expectations any time soon. . I'll be going on vacation for roughly two months starting next week, where I'll probably have no access to computers. It's hard to say when my next update will be considering that, but I don't think I'll be giving up again on any of my stories any time soon.**) ****

****Once again, thank you very much for your support!**) ****

Chapter 4 : Where it Begins

"Um, you really don't have to-"

"Nonsense! Escorting you back to your _okiya_ is the least I can do!" Kondou-han laughed.

The three of us must've made quite a sight, walking down the street together. Really, how did I get myself into this again? Kondou-han had insisted that it was improper to let a lady walk around in the rain by herself, who didn't have an umbrella and was going to catch hypothermia if she stayed out much longer.

He didn't believe me when I informed him that I never get sick.

"_Kyokuchou!_"

A _samurai _suddenly ran up to us, stopping in front of Kondou-han, panting heavily, "Hi... Hijikata-san an... and San... Sannan-san... as... asked me to... find you..."

"This can't be good now, can it?" I turned to Okita-han, who'd spoken, "Kondou-san, should we return to headquarters now? Sounds like Hijikata-san and Sannan-san are having trouble with Serizawa-san again."

"I can get back on my own," I piped up, trying to ease his conscience and get rid of the awkward tension I currently felt, "The _okiya _isn't too far from here..."

"Eh? Really?" Kondou-han blinked in surprise, "I thought we still had a ways to go..."

"Oh, no," I shook my head, "I... um, I work at a different _okiya _now."

If he didn't know about the fate that had befallen my _okiya_, then there was no need to enlighten him. I didn't know him very well, but I had an inkling that he'd feel guilty if he knew that the _okiya_ had closed down because it was destroyed by that assassination attempt.

... Well, I don't know about others, but I hated that nauseating wave of guilt that always weighed so heavily upon me.

"Alright, then," He seemed perfectly oblivious to the thoughts running through my head, "I'll go back first, then. Souji can accompany you the rest of the way."

I gave a small start at his words, "Sir, there's no need to-"

"That's settled, then," Kondou-han clapped his hands together with an air of finality, "Well... It was nice seeing you again!"

"But-... I... I..." I trailed off as he smiled jovially and walked down the other street, presumably returning to their headquarters with the _samurai_, "..."

...

"Let's go," Okita-han began walking down the street after that awkward pause of silence, "The sooner you're at your okiya the sooner I can return as well."

I had to quickly run a couple of steps to catch up with him. Thankfully, it wasn't raining as hard anymore, but that didn't mean I appreciated being left behind in the rain. One would think that he'd be more of a gentleman like Kondou-han... "Are you saying that because you're annoyed at having to bring me back, or because you want to get back to Kondou-han as quickly as possible?"

"Both."

I made a face at him when I saw his eyes wander elsewhere as he deliberately ignored me. The corners of his lips curved upwards, which immediately caused an extreme urge to face-palm slamming into me. So much for being discreet. He seemed to be really, really aware of his surroundings... even more so than that night at the banquet...

"Did the attack make you more paranoid, or something?"

He gave me a slitted glance from the corner of his eyes, "What makes you think so?"

I didn't miss the way his hand twitched toward his katana, and the sharp, guarded tone in his voice suddenly seemed so obvious that it made me wonder why I hadn't picked up on it sooner before.

I purposely shrugged, trying to pass things off, "... You seem different."

"Aren't you a perceptive one." His eyes narrowed oh-so-minutely that it was almost unnoticeable. Key word here being 'almost'.

"I'm a maiko, probably going to be made into a geisha soon." I tried to remain casual, "We notice things. Pick up on the smaller details. Y'know, serving the guests and all, keeping them happy...?"

"You certainly don't sound like the average maiko to me," His casual, joking voice was suddenly tinted with a serious edge, almost sounding... dark.

... No, that was just my imagination. There was no reason for me to think like that... I was just thrown off for a moment. Yes, that was it.

"How did you save Kondou-san?"

I froze mid-step. Murky water from a nearby puddle splashed all over the hem of my kimono, but my mind barely registered that little fact right now. Calm down, calm down... it's only a simple question, no need for your heart to pound like you're being interrogated or something...

"I find it hard to believe that a simple maiko would be so...

observant, as you put it," He maintained a lighthearted tone, but the underlying threatening tone in it was unmistakable. Even through he didn't bother turning to face me while he talked, it was still enough to send small chills down my spine, "Who are you, exactly? What are you here for?"

"... If only someone could tell me..." I murmured to myself as my thoughts flitted back to Kaoru for the briefest of moments, "Look, I... You're overthinking things here," I finally said, "I'm not... I'm not here to 'cause trouble' or anything. I was sold here years ago by... by my father. I don't even want to be here, but... I'm stuck here. Almost everyone who's been sold stays in the okiya forever."

It didn't matter. It didn't matter to me that I was going to spend my entire life as a geisha. It didn't matter to me that I would have to live under disguises and pretend to be someone who I wasn't. It didn't matter to me that I'd be chained here forever, forced to do things I didn't want to do all over again...

It didn't matter that people would never see me as anything more than a doll.

I smiled emptily, the facial expression so automatic now after being ingrained by hours and hours of pretenses, "You want to know what happened that night, Okita-han? I killed someone. See, there was one of those assassins standing right behind Kondou-han, and he didn't notice him... so I took matters into my own hands. I used a dagger to do it. The same dagger that almost killed my onee-san..."

I shook my head, trying to clear myself of the scattered thoughts flitting around, "Well... you're right, to some degree... I'm probably not your average maiko. I can promise you, though, that I'm not part of some sinister organization trying to sabotage things here in Kyoto for you and the other samurai. I mean, I can understand your suspicion. I would think the same if I were in your place... All I'm asking for is for you to believe me. I don't mean to cause harm to anyone."

There was silence between us for a few moments.

"... Kondou-han is really important to you, right?" Pieces of the puzzle were gathering together, and I felt something click in my mind when he remained silent. What he said to Serizawa-han at the banquet... his behavior today, after that incident...

"You're really too perceptive for your own good, hm?" Okita-han turned away from me, his eyes finally leaving my own, and I felt as if a great weight had lifted itself from my body, sending an involuntary shiver up my spine, "If you keep this up, I might have to kill you."

He said his last line in a half-serious, half-joking tone, which effectively hid his true intentions while delivering a warning simultaneously. At least he didn't look like he wanted to pull his katana on me right now anymore...

"Then I'll just have to talk less so you don't kill me, right?" I grinned up at him, adopting the same semi-lighthearted voice he was using as well.

He gave a small laugh, and I found myself somehow liking that sound. It sounded much nicer than all the other rough, burly laughs of the men I'd grown up hearing.

"Say 'aaah'."

I carefully spooned some medicine into _onee-san_'s mouth, watching her grimace at the taste. I found myself sympathizing with her, since most medicines were always bitter.

"Are you feeling better now?" I asked. Even with the daily doses of medicine, she seemed so pale and weak.

Yukiko smiled wanly, "If a dagger didn't kill me, I'd be most upset if it ended up being my medicine that kills me. Can't you do anything about that taste?"

I shook my head, "If I get rid of whatever things are in your medicine, you'll never get better."

Yukiko sighed and laid back down on her _futon_, "When is the doctor coming again?"

"Um... I think he's coming sometime this afternoon," I cocked my head to the side, "Why?"

"I-I think I might be getting sick," She muttered, fixating her gaze to the side, "It used to just be pain, but now I feel dizzy and nauseous most of the time."

I frowned. Winter was starting to settle in, the rain that seemed so long ago was going to be nothing compared to the snow. Getting sick during winter was definitely going to be dangerous for Yukiko, considering her wound and all.

"Hey, lighten up. I'll be fine," She waved a hand dismissively, "You should get back to work soon, before Mother gets mad. Again."

I raised an eyebrow, "And when has that ever stopped me?"

"... Never," Yukiko admitted, though not without a reprimanding glare, "You were always a rather disobedient child, I remember... You pretty much hated me at first, but we managed to get past that, thankfully. I was actually really surprised that you didn't try to run off or anything when you first... arrived."

I instinctively suppressed all the memories her words had inadvertently stirred up, "Eh, it's not like I was the only one who came that way."

"True."

I stood up, holding the now-empty bowl that used to contain her medicine, "I guess I'll see you tomorrow morning, _onee-san_?"

"A-actually..."

I felt myself frowning again, "Is there something wrong?"

"N-no. No, it's nothing," Yukiko gave a nervous laugh and waved me off again, "There isn't anything wrong, don't wo-"

Her words were suddenly cut off when she started coughing, and I rushed to her side again. This wasn't the usual coughing noise, it was almost like there was something stuck in her throat...

"I... I'm fine. Really. It'll take more than a cold to stop me."

I scowled slightly, "Now is no time to be stubborn, especially considering that injury. Should I look for a different doctor? I always thought that old lady was rather fishy..."

Yukiko groaned, "Must you refer to the doctor in that manner?"

"What? It's true, have you ever seen that weird look she sends my way each time-"

She rolled her eyes, "That's because you tripped her. Twice."

"I was eight!" I protested.

"... Do you really think I buy that argument?"

"..."

"Thought so."

I sighed, "Really now, _onee-san?_"

Yukiko gave a bell-like laugh, "You should probably get going. Isn't there a lot of customers here today?"

I blinked, surprised, "Yes, but... how did you know?"

"I can hear all the people outside," She shrugged, "That, and you hate wearing a _kimono_ no matter what the occasion is. If you didn't have to get to work immediately after giving me medicine today, you wouldn't be all dressed up like this... by the way, red is a good color on you. You should wear it more often... that dark blue one is so depressing."

I twitched. My dark blue one had been the one I'd ripped up to bandage her with on that night... "_Onee-san!_"

She just smiled and laughed at me again, waving a hand in my direction in a 'shoo'-ing motion, "Run along now."

"I'll come back again tonight after I'm done, okay?" I cast a backward glance toward her frail form on the _futon_, biting the bottom of my lip as I slid the door shut.

Even though she was trying to put up a strong front... I still couldn't shake off the feeling that she _wasn't_ fine, not in the least. But... the doctor had assured me over and over again that Yukiko _onee-san_ would be alright, so... ugh, maybe I was just a bit paranoid these days, or something...

"You're late!" My new Mother barked at me as soon as I rounded the corner of the narrow hallway, snatching the empty medicine bowl from me (more like jerked it out of my hands, really) "Go up, third floor, fifth room! Grab that flute of yours while you're at it too, and join the other girls playing near the back of the room _quietly_, y'hear me?"

"_Hai_."

"Hmph," She turned around on her heel and stormed off, shoving the bowl into the arms of a startled-looking _maiko_, just eleven or so, "Get that to the kitchens! And you, girl, what are you still standing here for? I'll have you know that you've got to earn your keep here!"

I ran/shuffled in the opposite direction towards the room I shared with three other _maiko_ around my age, yanking the door open and stepping over to my meager bundle of belongings.

"Flute, flute, flute..." I muttered to myself, eyes lighting up when I finally found the piece of hollowed wood, "Ah-ha!"

I did a once-over in the mirror standing by the side of the room, smoothing out the vermillion cloth of the black-rimmed _kimono_ I was wearing and readjusting a hairpin. Then I practically charged down the hallway again, launching myself up the staircase in the back of the _okiya_ and praying with all my heart that this would be the one day that I wouldn't trip by taking the stairs in a way too uncomfortable _kimono_.

"Fifth room..." I stumbled, inwardly wincing when I heard a small tear of silk. Ooh, this was _so_ going to get docked out of my pay...

â€| On the bright side, at least I didn't faceplant into the railings or anything.

Taking a moment to catch my breath beside the doorway of my designated room, I tugged at my _kimono_ a little so that the rip was less noticeable. Taking a tray of delicious-smelling food from the jovial serving girl who looked highly amused by all this, I slid the door open and stepped inside-

-and froze.

â€|

The plate fell from my numbed fingers and shattered on the ground, splintering and sending pieces of shrapnel flying everywhere, skidding to a stop in a pool of warm scarlet.

Chapter 4 : End

Cliffie? Huh? What are you talking about? XD â€| Not really up to my usual standards, and I apologize for thatâ€| but now that I'm finally back on track (somewhat), I hope you look forward to what happens next! Feel free to guess what our **_maiko**_** found in the room! (I don't know, do you? â€"grinsâ€")**

â€|

I think I'll bring a notebook on my plane rideâ€¦ just so at least I'll get something done on my vacation. ^^" I feel a little guilty, after allâ€¦

6. Chapter 5

Yay, I got another chapter out! xD I apologize if it's still not up to the usual standards yet, I'm still trying to get back into the swing of writing â€"and failing- and it's been kinda crazy since I'm still on vacation. :/

Also, I've updated my other stories since the abrupt hiatus last year, so feel free to wander over if you like. ^^

Now, I'd like to present the next chapter! Thank you for your patience and understanding!

Chapter 5 : Unexpected Discovery

"What are you doing here, girl?"

Dead. They were all dead. The still-cooling corpses of my new sisters were piled together in a bloody heap, as if someone had messily (painfully) slit their throats, and then just shoved them all together in a heap to the side of the room.

Nothing had been disturbed in the room. The platters of food were still neatly arranged onto the small tables, the silken pillows scattered by the individual seats, the golden candles lit along the floor on flower-like cups.

Nothing, absolutely nothing was out of place... save for that dark scarlet liquid seeping across the wooden floorboards.

And the shattered plate of chicken that had formerly been held in my hands.

One of the men, an indigo-haired -holy shit, that was a bloody sword in his hands!- _demon_, my mind whispered, cracked a sly grin in my direction. "Oho? Looks like there was one we missed, Tonouchi-san."

His voice was oily, smooth, almost like a snake's.

Demon, my mind whispered again, _Demon. Killer. Liar._

The other man seated at the other side of the room scrambled to his feet, trembling lightly, "I-I deeply apologize for this, I never expected that there would be another-"

"Ehhh, don't apologize, Tonouchi-san." He waved his hand dismissively, "Just get rid of her. We certainly don't need anyone knowing that you're betraying the Roshigumi now, hmm? It would be most troublesome if news of this were to leak out..."

Get rid of her.

...

"O-of course!" The brown-haired samurai's right hand couldn't have flown faster to the hilt of his katana, and the sleek blade was hastily drawn from its sheath with a messy clatter in his rush.

Clang.

The loud metallic ringing was what jerked my mind back into reality, throwing away that haze of panic and the lockdown I'd unconsciously put my body under upon seeing so much blood. I moved on instinct alone at his first slash, the silvery flash making my leg muscles automatically coil and spring of its own accord. There was a dangerously cold pressure that weighed on my chest for a few brief seconds (seconds that seemed to last an eternity) in the single moment when that silver arc came so close to me.

The katana was uninterrupted, all the way until it sank into the wooden floorboards.

"Ara?" The indigo-haired man blinked in surprise, sweeping away a few strands of wavy hair from his face as if to confirm what he just saw, "Tonouchi-san, are you losing your touch?"

Heart hammering against my ribcage, I tensed apprehensively as the samurai -Tonouchi- yanked his sword out and advanced on me again, this time both hands tightly gripping the katana. There was no falter in his step this time, the embarrassment only fueling his movements to become more aggressive, and he struck out even quicker than before, the blade point darting straight for my throat.

It was a close call.

He changed direction as soon as he saw me move to dodge his strike, and I was only saved by tripping on my kimono, of all things. The ripping sound of fabric reached my ears, but I was in no mood to be wallowing over that, scrambling to my feet as fast as possible and making a break for the doors.

Escape, make a commotion. Let someone know, get help. They killed my sisters, and they wanted to kill me too...

I hissed when I saw the katana slicing towards me again, and the man firmly placed himself between me and the doors.

Great. So much for escape now.

"Stop running and I'll make this painless for you," He growled darkly, the submission he had showed before to the other man long having evaporated into thin air, "It'll be quick, that much I will assure you..."

"And I'm supposed to believe that," I quipped dryly, trying to hide how my eyes were focused on possible escape routes behind him. It was important not to move the eyes too much, the movement would be obvious and suspicious, which would alert him to the fact that I hadn't quite given up on my life yet...

Besides, eyes darting around wildly was the sign of a prey that had been cornered by a predator. Looking like prey would only hasten my

death.

"I am a dedicated _samurai_, girl," The bulky man said with a touch of pride and arrogance, "My sword makes clean cuts."

"If you're a dedicated _samurai_, then why are you trying to kill me?" I shot back.

Distract him, stall for time. Surely the girl I had taken food from had heard the ensuing commotion in the room and had ran for aid already... like anyone with an ounce of common sense would've done...

"Ah, looks like we've got a feisty one on our hands, Tonouchi-san." The other man spoke slyly, eyes flashing, "You're very unlucky, _geisha-san_, to have been sent here. What's said in this room must stay in this room, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?" Confusion -and suspicion- reared its head in my stomach, "I just came here. I didn't hear anything."

He arched an eyebrow, "Oh, you didn't? â€| My bad, then, _geisha-san_. But you must understand our current situation, we prefer not to have any... leaks."

The way he was talking... it...

My eyebrows furrowed.

â€| It sounded like they were plotting something. Something top secret, no doubt having to do with all the fighting that was going on... hm. Wait. That man, Tonouchi... from the looks of things, he was 'under' that blue-haired man. He was restless, uneasy, which had only gone away after he gathered his concentration into killing me, now that I actually thought about it... so...

â€|

Was he a spy?

That would most certainly explain it, as spies were always jumpy and paranoid... but a _samurai_ as a spy? They had their own code of honor to follow... there was no way they would lower themselves as to-

Hang on.

I bit my lower lip. Roshigumi. That band of _samurai_ here, intermixed with a few stray swordsmen who had signed up to join them... that would be a different story altogether. The men definitely wouldn't be as strict as _samurai_, and their standards would be likely to be more... lax...

Roshigumi. Tonouchi was most likely from Roshigumi, that _samurai_ organization that had that disastrous banquet...

And he was a traitor.

How else could this behavior be explained? How else would he be meeting with someone else alone, no others from Roshigumi with him,

so scared of a possible 'leak', so to say?

I straightened cautiously, never taking my eyes off from him.

"You're betraying the Roshigumi, right Tonouchi-san?"

A metallic flash, and I spun to the side, suddenly intensely grateful for keeping my gaze on him. I wasn't nearly fast enough though, not this time, and I was caught across the shoulder by his katana.

My kimono_sleeve darkened with blood.

"Ah..." The other man across the room inhaled deeply before giving a sigh, closing his eyes, "... well, isn't this new... Huh, if I'm not mistaken, y-"

"_How did you know?_"

Crap. Maybe I shouldn't have set the words out there. The panic, that fear of being found out that every spy or traitor had -it had been suppressed for who-knows-how-long in Tonouchi. And now that I had spoken it aloud, ripped off that thin little facade that had been hanging there...

â€| It was akin to igniting an explosion.

His blows were quicker than before, deft twists of his wrist translating to swift sweeps of his katana, which surrounded me on all sides in a sharp metal storm. I was barely able to keep up with him, several times being nicked by the edge of the sword, which always drew away a ribbon of red with it.

I gasped when my back hit the edge of a railing -the room had been connected to a small 'balcony' of sorts- and the katana closed in on me immediately. My heart was bruising my ribs as the sword came closer and closer-

-it stopped. It stopped, right as the icy blade rested against my throat.

â€| Shit.

"Tell me," There was a wild look to his eyes now, and Tonouchi leaned in on me, teeth bared menacingly, "_How did you know? No one was supposed to know, no one suspected me!_"

I could feel his breath on my skin, and he was getting uncomfortably close, the maniacal glint in his eyes so unnerving, and...

â€|

Balcony. Third floor.

It was too high up to try and escape from with a simple jump or maneuver, especially considering this position I was in right now... the odds were obviously stacked against me. But...

_I don't want to die. Not like this. Not at the hands of a

madman._

Tonouchi had snapped. There was always a hard strain on the mentality of spies... he was clearly more suited to just swinging a sword than acting as an agent...

He stepped forward, intent on pressing the blade harder and forcing out answers-

I _moved_, throwing my body backwards and arching my neck so that everything was disconcertingly upside down, hooking my feet around his legs in the same moment I did so. There was a brief sensation of something cool sinking in on my neck before it was clearly replaced by a dull warmth -but I didn't have time to dwell on it. Not now.

Not when I was falling towards my death.

â€| Heh.

A smile -not one of those fake ones that took so long to perfect as 'attractive', not a real one of happiness, but one of bitter cold-overtook my lips. So this was it, wasn't it? I was going to die just like this...

My only consolation was that the mad _samurai_ was going to die with me.

Cool wind flew past us, whipping through my hair forcefully, and as we gained speed in our deceleration... I gave pause to my musings.

Who was going to take care of Yukiko-_neesan_?

Where did all this bloodshed come back and re-enter my life?

What did Nagumo Kaoru really want with me?

Would I ever get the answers, the _answers_I wanted so badly to my questions?

But...

â€|

As the ground neared us and I became aware of the weightless falling sensation that had numbed my body, one thing became clear to me.

I would never get my answers if I died right now.

Using the force of our fall, I tightened my legs around the slack _samurai_ and swung forwards, arching my back in tandem -almost like a backflip, a backwards somersault. Except the ground was dangerously close now, and I caught a glimpse of the jagged glass shards in the dark alleyway-

A scream.

There was a blood-curling, bone-chilling scream, and it wasn't my own.

I panted, my heartbeat racing way too quick for my liking, and I blinked, _stunned_, as the crazy thing I'd done on instinct _worked_. It actually _worked_.

I had successfully maneuvered our bodies so that I landed atop the _samurai_, using his bulky figure as a cushion.

Shakily, I realized that my legs were still tightly clinging to Tonouchi's body, not having registered the impulse that it was okay now, that I was still _alive_. In fact, I felt... disconnected all over, and nothing was quite... responsive.

Paralysis. Was it from the shock? Or was it from the too-close brush with death?

I didn't move. _Didn't_ move, not _couldn't_ move, not even as the shock abated and subsided, giving reign to the pain receptors in my body again. There was this stinging sensation at my neck from where the _katana_ had almost sliced into my throat, and the many cuts that littered my body were making their presences known right now. Painfully.

“Why?”

Why in the world -what could cause someone to betray a _samurai_ organization? He was a traitor, that much I was certain of, but it still didn't make sense... what would prompt a betrayal?

“

I remained still even as footsteps sounded at the opening of the alleyway.

"Wow, you seem have a knack for getting involved, hmm?"

“I know that voice.

Tiredly, I turned around, smoothing out my features and placing on what I hoped was a pleasant, placid expression, one that was used when I greeted guests.

"Good evening, Okita-han."

Ch 4 : End

“*** Sooo... er, the plot thickens? xD I'm planning for the oni to take a more active role in this story, that's all I'll say for now. And I just realized, for some weird reason, that the url I posted a few chapters ago never showed up. -.-" So, here it is again: .com**

**Aaaand... hm, I think that's it for now. ^^ Souji shows up after this little episode, and it'll be continued in the next chapter. Please tell me what you thought of this one! :D **

**Sorry for the long pause between updates. There wasn't as much time as I would've liked for writing, even after I got back from vacation. ^^" However, as a treat, I've decided to speed up the plotline! xD That means not as many fillers as I planned, butâ€¦ well, at least we're going to be heading into the interesting things soon.
^^**

Oh, and I just realized that the url didn't show up the second time, either. -- Sooo, just delete the spaces here: tokio-fujita . liverjournal . com

â€¦ **Alright, here we go! Sixth chapter! :D**

Ch 6 : Memories

Tonouchi was confirmed as a traitor to the Roshigumi. Observations had shown that he often slipped away and disappeared when he thought no one was watching, and over the last month his movements had gained a degree of furtiveness and jumpiness that most certainly hadn't been there before.

It seemed like he wasn't a very successful spy, at any rate.

There hadn't been any orders to put him down as of yet, since they wanted to use him to find out who was behind him, but lately he had been spreading ill words about Kondou-han amongst the soldiers. Kondou-han himself was oblivious to this, but...

"-nd Serizawa-san was kind enough to tip me off to this." Okita-han smiled darkly, eyes glinting dangerously under the shaky light of the pale moon, "There were going to be orders to kill him anyways. Although, I guess you beat it to me..."

It was strange, to hear someone talking so casually about death (aloud, at least).

"He... he may have been trying to meet with whatever party he was spying for tonight," I said, my eyes drifting to the dusty ground rather than meet those emerald orbs. It was then that I noticed that, like him, my walk was completely silent. There was no sound of any footsteps, a habit I'd developed early on to-

I cut off that train of thought and began deliberately making sure that my tall _okobo_made soft little clunks as I continued to walk. It was a little harder than I thought to get the hang of leaving noises with my footsteps, since I messed up the first couple steps and sent loud clacking noises echoing around the street...

I would've cringed at the noise, had I not seen Okita-han give me a suspicious glance from the corner of his eye. So much for pretending to be an ordinary _maiko_...

A dull red glow flickered onto the dirt-worn path, and I looked up to see the vibrantly decorated doorways of my new _okiya_again.

"I'll go back to clean things up," Meaning dispose of the body to avoid scaring ordinary civilians like me. Okita-han turned around to leave, before another thought seemed to strike him last-minute, "Oh! And we might send a few people over to question your _okiya_about Tonouchi later."

"... Why not now?" I cocked my head at him, not that he could see it anyways... "They're more likely to be much more agreeable and go along with whatever you say when everything has just happened."

If you give them a chance to gather their wits, then you'll have to pay money to get anything useful out from their lips. Not that there'd be too many people willing to offer information anyways, considering how Tonouchi had killed-

-I pursed my lips.

"Well, maybe if I was Sannan-san, I'd do it now rather than leave it for later," Okita-han turned around, and I saw the barest trace of a smirk on his face, "... But you really think that I'm the nice interrogation type here? I really don't have the patience to be sitting around and trying to fish out answers from a dozen people..."

"There won't be a dozen people to question," I muttered under my breath, "You'll be lucky if there's even three."

"... Oh?" He arched an eyebrow.

After a brief moment of hesitation, I started formulating my words, "Look... Tonouchi, he... he killed at least five of my sisters. That means you won't have many people to question in the first place. Any others who were related to it will most likely keep their heads down to avoid trouble. Not even money will make people talk if their lives are at stake. I'm also going to take a guess here... and say that Kondou-han probably won't condone torturing people for information. Even though it's quite effecti-"

-Damn. I think I said too much.

"Hm..." Okita-han seemed to ponder what I just said for a moment, while I prayed that he would ignore the last little bit I said. It wasn't to be so, since he turned his head around and lowered a sly grin on me, "We-ll, you certainly seem to know a lot about this stuff, _maiko-chan._"

I froze, a memory coming to me, unbidden, overwhelming me in a tidal wave...

â€|

"Che," The burly man spat out a mouthful of blood, hate-filled eyes burning with disdain, "So what now, *****? You're going to make that devil child kill me? You have no proof!"

Father's eyes were rough and cold, "I don't need proof. You made sure that I wouldn't have any, and, I'll admit it, you did quite an admirable job in... making sure the witnesses would keep quiet."

The man regarded Father suspiciously, "... What did you do?"

Father shrugged, "Oh, nothing. It's just... well, you kept your wife close around, didn't you?"

The man stiffened, before gritting his teeth, "I don't know what you're talking about, *****."

"I'll show you what I'm talking about, then," Father turned towards me, "Get that woman out. Now."

I scrambled to obey.

The lady was pretty. She would've been prettier if her long raven hair was still glossy and well-combed, if her face wasn't a sickly ashen shade, if there wasn't dried blood caking her skin...

"Midori!" The man lost it when he saw her, lunging forward despite the ropes coiled around his arms -and Father's foot smashed into his face.

I think he broke his nose.

"Now," Father practically purred, the satisfactory gleam in his eyes streaked with sadism, "All I need, Taka, is for you to confess and give me written proof. Then you and your lovely wife will be free. Isn't that perfect?"

_"You-... you __**bastard!**__" The man, Taka, was trembling now, "I... You know I can't betray __**them**_. _They... anyone that goes against them dies, I-"_

Father turned his gaze on me, "You know what to do."

"Yes, Daddy."

Almost as if she knew what was going to happen, the pretty lady tried to run. I felt no inhibitions whatsoever when I took out the small dagger in my hand and crouched, slicing through the tendons in both of her ankles with two flicks of my wrist.

The way she crumpled to the ground, screaming in pain, was very ungraceful.

Ignoring the violent outburst from Mr. Taka, I sat on top of the pretty lady to make sure she wouldn't run anymore, and stabbed the dagger into her shoulder.

She screamed. It was louder this time. The sound only magnified when I dragged the small blade downwards, watching the crimson liquid pool out wherever I let the dagger in my hand wander...

"STOP! STOP IT, STOP! MIDORI!"

"Hmm..." Father flicked a lazy eye over to Mr. Taka, "Feeling a little more agreeable now?"

"I..." He looked frantic, completely torn and desperate, "I...!"

"Ah, guess not," Father sighed, "Continue."

"Yes, Daddy."

_ "NO!" Mr. Taka's eyes never strayed from the pretty lady, only growing more and more anguished with each scream she let out._

_ "Just remember, you can stop this anytime you want," Father whispered in his ear, "All you have to do is write me that confession in blood. So, how about it?"_

_ "... I... you..." The man was going to break soon, they always did... "No. NO! YOU'RE GOING TO KILL MIDORI!"_

_ "Tch. Stubborn fool," Father shook his head, and looked over at where I was still drawing little red pictures on the lady's back, except they were all blurring together now and the lady wasn't screaming so much anymore... "Here, catch."_

_ I caught the little vial of red liquid he tossed to me and uncorked it, forcing its contents down the lady's throat._

_ "WHAT ARE YOU DOING-" The man broke off as the the pretty lady's wounds began disappearing right before his eyes, stitching themselves together without leaving so much as a scar, "... How... wait... it-... all along... __**you**__ were the one, *****?"_

_ Father smirked, "I can torture her as many times as I need to make you talk, Taka. Continue, Rima!"_

_ "Yes, Daddy." My eyes flickered over to Mr. Taka. He still wasn't quite breaking yet..._

_ Ah. So what if I..._

_ My hand grabbed the pretty lady's hair and I yanked it, hard, so that her face was uplifted and looking into mine._

_ I smiled. Daddy would be happy if Mr. Taka broke, right?_

_ "You're really pretty, Midori-san," Her forest green eyes showed fear when they caught how I was twirling my dagger with one hand, "Really, really pretty. I especially like your eyes, Midori-san."_

_ In all honesty, I didn't even know if that haunting, childish little voice was mine anymore... But that didn't matter, as long as Mr. Taka would break..._

_ The smile on my face widened, and I stopped spinning my dagger, grabbing it firmly in my hand, "Can I keep your eyes, Midori-san?"_

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_ "Good job, Rima." _

_ Mr. Taka had broken. They always did._

Father laughed, "Your creativity astounds me. Sometimes, it seems like you really know a lot about this stuff..."

I smiled. Daddy had complimented me!

"You'll do that for me again, won't you?" His voice was soft, dark, dangerous, but I didn't care.

"Yes, Daddy."

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"-llo? Still there?" I blinked, startled, as a hand passed in front of my face. Okita-han looked at me with a small frown, "It's rude to space out on others when they talk, ya know."

"I... Did I...What..." I trailed off, before my mind finally came back to the present again, "S-sorry, Okita-han."

I quickly bowed, hoping that he hadn't noticed anything from my eyes. Eyes were a fatal weakness, the one thing you couldn't control. There was a reason that they were known as windows to the soul...

"Well, I'll go tell Kondou-san about this," Had I only imagined that calculative look in his emerald eyes? The small smile on his face was throwing me off... "Even if we can't get anything out of the others we can still question you, right?"

I blinked.

Then my mind processed what he just said.

"Ehh?!"

Okita-han was already halfway down the street now, a soft laugh trailing behind him, presumably at my expense. I could only stare at his retreating back, mouth gaping like a fish as he silently faded away into the distance.

â€|

"You didn't listen to me."

I jumped, completely caught off-guard, and spun around only to find myself staring into the brown eyes of one Nagumo Kaoru. When did she even get here? No, wait â€_"how did she get here? It was like â€_"almost as if she'd appeared out of thin air!

"Why did you go looking for information on your own?" She seemed unaware of my shock, either that or purposely ignoring it. Personally, I think it's the latter.

"I didn't!" It wasn't hard to project the bewilderment and incredulity I felt, "I haven't done anything!"

"Oh?" She arched an eyebrow and took a step forward, "Haven't you?"

I rubbed my temples, taking in a deep breath to calm my frazzled nerves, "... Look. I almost got killed a little while ago. You coming up here and accusing me of doing something I haven't the faintest remembrance of doing isn't exactly helping right now."

Kaoru-san frowned, "_Killed?_"

I sighed. Much as she seemed to know, apparently she didn't know everything, "Never mind."

"No, I think I do mind," She blocked me when I tried to step into the _okiya_. Idly, I wondered why nobody had even noticed us standing over here at the doorway. Then again, considering the clamor that was going on inside right now... most likely, they had just found the bodies of my new sisters.

"Let me pass, Kaoru-san," I said quietly.

"If you almost just _died_," She seemed to be unusually agitated today... "Then it means that... no, no, it doesn't make _sense_. Why would they want to kill off... unless... they didn't know? If that's the case, then..."

I blinked at her ramblings.

"What?"

"You don't get it," Kaoru-san shook her head, before a sudden thought seemed to occur to her, "Wait. Were you hurt?"

"I-... what?" I was surprised by the abrupt question, "Pardon?"

"No, stupid question," Her eyes locked onto the bloodstained patch on my shoulder, where Tonouchi had cut me, "... This really, really complicates things, then..."

I let out a frustrated sigh, "Just what are you talking about? If what you know has something to do with why I almost died today, I think I have a right to know."

Kaoru hesitated, her eyes darkening... before she relented.

"It wouldn't have mattered too much if you hadn't gotten injured..." She said slowly, "But you did. You bled. That means... that means he caught the scent of your blood."

"... Excuse me?" Talking about the scent of blood was nothing new. But what did she mean by 'the scent of _your _blood_'?

"They'll know," A grim look crept over her face, "Oh, they'll know all right, once he goes back to report. He's probably reporting to them even as we speak right now. After all these yearsâ€¦ they'll finally know where you are, and then they're going to come for you... listen to me. As long as you still have even a single drop of blood left in your veins, they'll never stop hunting you down."

â€¦| **:3 Hint: I told you that the oni were going to take a more

active role in this fanficâ€¦| see if you can guess what's going on!
xD**

End
file.